

Nuclear panel appointment confusing

Yucca Mountain supporter says Gibbons aides recruited her

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Las Vegas Review-Journal
July 27, 2007

The Nevada Nuclear Projects Commission's whole mission is to shape state policy on Yucca Mountain.

Gov. Jim Gibbons opposes the proposed nuclear waste repository about 100 miles outside Las Vegas. So why did he essentially recruit a pro-Yucca official to the commission?

In her first comments on the appointment, Nye County Commissioner Joni Eastley told the Pahrump Valley Times earlier this week that the governor's office urged her to seek the position and didn't ask her what she thought about Yucca.

Eastley told the paper that, starting last month, someone from Gibbons' office whom she declined to name repeatedly suggested she apply for the appointment.

Then, shortly after she was told she was getting the post, the appointment was being rescinded. Eastley resigned before that could occur.

"They (the governor's office) said, 'We didn't know you supported Yucca Mountain,' and I said, 'You never asked me,' " Eastley told the newspaper. "I was asked to apply -- I didn't push my way in. I was asked to apply several times."

The governor's office said Eastley was encouraged to apply because "she was recommended to our office," Gibbons spokeswoman Melissa Subbotin said Thursday. "Staff followed up on the recommendation and contacted her. That's standard procedure."

Subbotin said she didn't know who recommended Eastley, what staff member contacted the commissioner or whether any vetting was done before Eastley's application was sought.

Once Eastley submitted her resume, "There was a cursory review of her views on Yucca Mountain, and based on the information we obtained, we felt that she remained objective in her views regarding Yucca Mountain," Subbotin said.

Eastley's pro-Yucca views have been documented in several news articles, including a 2002 Review-Journal story in which she embraced the nuclear waste dump.

"The people in this community are very patriotic and they're proud of the fact that they had something to do with developing the storage facility for this waste," Eastley was quoted as saying at the time.

Eastley, who lives in Tonopah, could not be reached for comment on Thursday.

Once Eastley's position on Yucca came to light last week, Gibbons acted to remove her, saying he admired her service to the community in other matters but needed someone who agreed with him on the nuclear commission.

The question remains, however, how and why Eastley was ever Gibbons' pick for the post.

The state Democratic Party criticized the short-lived appointment Thursday based on Eastley's reported comments.

"Either Gibbons is softening on our state's long tradition of united, bipartisan opposition to the nuclear waste dump, or he doesn't know what is going on in his own office with regard to one of the most important dangers facing Nevadans," Kirsten Searer, the party's deputy executive director, said in a prepared statement.

"Gibbons needs to fess up on who in his office encouraged Eastley to apply for this key position. And he should explain why no one asked about her long-standing support for Yucca Mountain, even as they were courting her for this vital role," Searer added.

The Nuclear Projects Commission is a seven-member board whose members are chosen by the governor, the Legislative Commission, the League of Cities and the Association of Counties.

"Its job is to advise the governor and the Legislature about what the policies regarding Yucca Mountain should be for the state," said Bob Loux, the commission-appointed executive director of the Agency for Nuclear Projects. And the state's official position is anti-Yucca.

Like the rest of Nevada's federal representatives, Gibbons opposed the waste dump as a five-term congressman representing northern and rural Nevada, including Nye County, where the repository would be located. Many Nye County residents see the project as inevitable and a potential economic opportunity.

Subbotin said it doesn't matter what happened with Eastley, because the matter is closed.

"The governor has a long track record of being opposed to the Yucca Mountain project, and he believes the membership of the commission should reflect his views," Subbotin said. "We're moving past that appointment. That's a moot issue. ... This issue is no longer relevant."